

## 4 - Covenants

Before we get started, I've been asked to talk about the important covenants we make. Of course, since we are talking about Abraham, the most important covenant we make is the covenant of exaltation. He not only wanted to receive the ordination to the Priesthood and receive the covenants of exaltation, he also wanted to administer those same ordinances to other people: his family and his posterity. As we saw in Abr 1:2, he was seeking for the Blessings of the Fathers, or the Rights of the Fathers. Those are covenants that are eternal.

A simple definition of a covenant is a promise to be obedient. The covenants we make in the Temple, for example, are promises to be obedient to certain laws. We are covenanting to be obedient to higher laws. If there is no law attached to those covenants, then the covenant remains empty and really means nothing. We enter into covenants to live the law of sacrifice, the law of the Gospel, the law of virtue and the law of consecration. Anciently when two parties entered into a covenant they would use the term *Karath B'rith*, which literally means to "cut a covenant." Anciently there was always a cutting when a covenant was made. The cutting is always a symbol of death or sacrifice. In the Old Testament the covenant cutting process is seen at least 13 times. One of the most famous times is found in the Book of Ruth. Naomi is told by her daughter-in-law that she will remain with her:

**16** And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

**17** Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: *the Lord do so to me, and more also*, if ought but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Ruth is making a promise (i.e. a covenant) with Naomi to remain with her. In verse seventeen Ruth makes the statement, "*the Lord do so to me, and more*," and then states that only death will part her from this promise to Naomi. This phrase, "Lord do so to me and more," is, as Edward F. Campbell states in the *Anchor Bible Series* on *Ruth*, an "oath formulary."

This solemn oath formulary appears only here and in eleven passages in Samuel and Kings. The first part of it was *presumably accompanied by a symbolic gesture, something like our index finger across the throat*. Deep behind this lay, in all probability, a ritual act involving the slaughter of animals, to whom the one swearing the oath equated himself. The slaughtered and split animals represent what the oath-taker invites God to do to him if he fails to keep the oath.

(Campbell, Edward F. Jr., *Anchor Bible: Ruth, Vol. 7, Doubleday, 1975. p.74, as sourced in Bruce H. Porter's book, The Threshing Floor of Faith*)

In Hebrew the word for "oath" means a symbol for death or sacrifice when used in conjunction with making a promise of obedience ("Thus may the Lord do to me...").

We see this also when Satan sets up his "Oath and Combinations" with Cain. In the Book of Mormon we see the same things being established in Helaman 6 and Ether Chapter 8. "Secret

oaths and combinations” differ from the “oaths and covenants” of the priesthood in important ways. The Oath formulary for Satan’s covenants always involves secrecy: the participants are required to “swear by their heads and their throats that they tell it not.”

This ‘oath formulary’ has been passed down through the ages and has been participated in by almost all youth. The familiar juvenile promise of secrecy, accompanied with the well-known phrase, “*cross my heart and hope to die,*” is a prime example. The crossing of the heart is not the cross of Christianity, but the ‘dividing asunder,’ or the cutting in two – in other words, making a commitment to die before breaking the promise.

Zoram’s fears were silenced when Nephi promised “*with an oath* that he need not fear; that he should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us” (1 Nephi 4:33). It would have been understood by Zoram that Nephi promised to put his life on the line with a symbolic act of death or sacrifice, ensuring Laban’s servant by oath and covenant of his safety.

This solemnizing of the “oath” by a cutting (an actual sacrifice or a symbolic act of death or cutting) is meant to indicate that the covenant or promise is more important than death. It did not necessarily mean that the individual could be slain if he didn’t keep the stipulations, but that the commitment was more important than life itself. You may remember the “Anti-Lehi-Nephi’s” who covenanted to lay down their weapons of war. They indicated that they would rather die than to break their covenants.

### **Alma 24:18**

18 And this they did, it being in their view a testimony to God, and also to men, that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man's blood; and this they did, vouching and covenanting with God, that *rather than* shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives; and *rather than* take away from a brother they would give unto him; and *rather than* spend their days in idleness they would labor abundantly with their hands.

The oath they made or the covenant they made was so serious that they would rather die than break their covenant! An oath and covenant is made between you and God; a secret oath and combination is made between you and a group of people who have all taken the same oath of secrecy, and who all possess the right to kill anyone who breaks the oath of secrecy by revealing the group’s secret designs for power, gain, and unrighteous authority over others.

Here are insightful verses from **Ether 8**:

14 And it came to pass that they all swore unto him, by the God of heaven, and also by the heavens, and also by the earth, and *by their heads*, that whoso should vary from the assistance which Akish desired *should lose his head*; and whoso should divulge whatsoever thing Akish made known unto them, the same should *lose his life*.

15 And Akish did administer unto them the oaths which were given by them of old who also sought power, which had been handed down even from Cain, who was a murderer from the beginning.

## Helaman 6:

21 But behold, Satan did stir up the hearts of the more part of the Nephites, insomuch that they did unite with those bands of robbers, and did **enter into their covenants and their oaths**, that they would protect and preserve one another in whatsoever difficult circumstances they should be placed, that they should not suffer for their murders, and their plunderings, and their stealings.

22 *They did have their signs, yea, their secret signs, and their secret words; and this that they might distinguish a brother* who had entered into the covenant, that whatsoever wickedness his brother should do he should not be injured by his brother, nor by those who did belong to his band, who had taken this covenant.

23 And thus they might murder, and plunder, and steal, and commit whoredoms and all manner of wickedness, contrary to the laws of their country and also the laws of their God.

Of the key covenants we make, Obedience is always the first law of heaven. Baptism is the first covenant of obedience that we all enter into. When we are baptized as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we covenant with God that we will be obedient and serve God and keep his commandments. Likewise, before we can participate in the Temple endowment (The Church of the Firstborn), the first covenant we enter into is a covenant of obedience. We cannot be *disobedient* to Gospel law until we have covenanted *to be* obedient to the same. This is why obedience is the first ordinance and covenant we receive or make in the Church and in the Temple. We are agreeing to be obedient in order to receive greater light and truth and enter into greater covenants. Both King Benjamin in Mosiah 5 and Moses in Exodus 19 put their people under covenant to be obedient, with the people all standing and declaring that they would be obedient in order to receive the blessings the Lord had promised them. But first they were given a chance to withdraw of their own free will and choice.

In the Temple you are also first given a chance to withdraw of your own free will and choice. If you do not want to take on those further obligations (necessary to receive greater knowledge), which then require greater obligations of obedience, you are given a chance to withdraw of your own free will and choice. That's what Israel did in D&C 84:23-25: As the Children of Israel stood at the base of Mt Sinai, they told Moses that they did not want to go before God, that they wanted Moses to be their intermediary between them and God. Because they withdrew, Moses was taken out of their midst along with the higher Priesthood.

The New Testament records the story of the Pharisees who approached Jesus and asked him to list the most important commandments of God. The Pharisees wanted to know which of all the commandments was the greatest. These Pharisees believed that the Law of Moses contained 613 commandments, and they wanted to know which of all the 613 commandments was the greatest. The High Priests wore robes with pomegranates dangling from the bottoms of their robes, symbolic of that, as each pomegranate was purported to contain 613 seeds.

## Matthew 22:35-40

35 Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,  
36 Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

38 This is the first and great commandment.

39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

When Christ answered the scribes and the Pharisees, he expressly said, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” What Christ is saying is that every other commandment that exists is supposed to help you develop the character that loves God and loves your fellowman. All of the law = the commandments, and all the prophets = whatever a prophet of God teaches, hang on these two commandments. All that our Priesthood leaders teach is supposed to assist us in developing a character that loves God and loves our fellowman. If that is the case, then all judgment also hangs upon those two great commandments. And the great thing about it all is that we will judge ourselves!

So, to define “sin,” we can say that sin is anything that distracts us from developing the character that loves God and loves our fellowman. Life is a probationary state. It is a time for us to change our character (repent) and serve God.

#### **Alma 42:4**

And thus we see, that there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God.

#### **Alma 12:24**

... therefore this life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead.

#### **Alma 34:32**

For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.

On a side note, we have a tendency to rank sins according to how grievous we think they are, with higher tolerance for the ones we’re guilty of or most familiar with. (*class laughter*) In reality your worst sin is the one that will keep you out of the Celestial Kingdom, whatever it is.

A man who drank a lot of coffee asked President Marion G. Romney one time if he thought drinking one cup of coffee would keep him out of the Celestial Kingdom? President Romney replied, “I sincerely hope not!”

We often have the tendency to categorize or rank the severity of our sins. A friend of mind told me one time that if his son came home and announced that he was gay, he would not let him in his house. I asked him if he would allow the son in his house if instead the son confessed to committing adultery. My friend replied, “Of course!” This is a perfect illustration of how we might categorize the severity of sin according to our own subjective judgment.

You all remember the story about the woman brought to Jesus who had been taken in the very act of adultery. She had broken the law and the commandment, and she never denied it. The consequence for breaking that law was to be stoned to death. The scribes and the Pharisees brought this woman to Christ to ask Him what should be done with her. They reminded Him of the Law of Moses, and what it said should be done. He stooped down to write something in the dirt, and then looked up and said, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” Those who brought the woman to Jesus were convicted by their own conscience and left the scene, one by one, from the eldest to the last. [The Old Testament law required that the witness to the breaking of this commandment was supposed to cast the first stone at the lawbreaker. Technically speaking, the witness against the accused was the only one who had a right to do that, because he would ostensibly be the only one there without sin.] Our text says:

### **John 8:10-11**

10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

Do you think God will condemn us for using the same agency that He made sure we could have?

Think about this—Satan’s plan would insure that none of us would sin, in essence destroying the agency of man, that not one soul would be lost (Moses 4:1). God’s plan, when you get right down to it, ensured that everyone *could* sin. That’s how important agency is. As Christ tells the woman taken in adultery, “Neither do I condemn thee [*for using your agency*].” What did he say? “Go, and sin no more.”

Jesus is telling the woman to sin no more because by not sinning, she can become happy. Commandments are not restrictions of your agency; commandments are recipes for your happiness. So what Jesus is really saying to the woman is, “I am not going to condemn you for using your agency, but if you really want to be happy here and in the next life, you need to make some changes.”

It comes down to this: God does not condemn us for what we do; He does not judge us for what we have done. He does not judge us for the agency we use. ***We judge ourselves!*** That is why we need to repent, so that when we stand before God, our confidence will wax strong in God’s presence, and we will not shrink from it (D&C 121:45). In other words, when it’s time for the final judgment, it won’t be God who puts us in a kingdom, it will be us; we will put ourselves in the kingdom where we will be the most happy and the most comfortable. Again, God does not condemn us for using our agency; ***WE*** do.

All of the commandments fall into the two categories of loving God or loving your fellowman, even the Ten Commandments: half of them relate to our dealings with our fellowman and the other half relate to our relationship with God.

This brings us to the covenants we make in the Temple. There are temporal needs and there are spiritual needs. There is the Aaronic Order and the Melchizedek Order. Moses and Aaron led the children of Israel under these two Orders of the Priesthood. The laws pertaining to those orders

are contained in our scriptures, so we can talk about them outside of the Temple. They are contained in the Old Testament, New Testament, Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants.

Aaronic Order = A Temporal Order		Melchizedek Order = A Spiritual Order	
The Law of Sacrifice	Temporal Needs	Law of Chastity (Virtue)	Spiritual Needs
The Law of the Gospel		Law of Consecration	

The Law of Sacrifice is to assist in sustaining and defending the Kingdom of God. D&C 119 defines the purpose of tithing. Tithing is for the debts of the Presidency of the Church. The Fast Offering is our true free will offering and is used to help the poor and the needy.

The Law of the Gospel is also under an Aaronic Order. This law is mentioned in two places in our scriptures: D&C 88:78, and the one that defines it best, **D&C 104:18**:

18 Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, **according to the law of my gospel**, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment.

The Law of the Gospel is designed to take care of the poor and the needy in the Kingdom of God. As mentioned above, the Fast Offering is our true free will offering. Tithing is a requirement, but it's the Fast Offering that comes from the heart.

In the Dead Sea community of Qumran, their fast offering rule was to work one day per month for the poor. They would donate the equivalent of one day's wage to the poor and needy in their community. This wasn't just two meals or a box of cereal. Can you imagine the impact if each family donated the amount equaling one day's wage per month to our ward fast offerings?

The Law of Sacrifice and the Law of the Gospel are under the Aaronic Order because they pertain to sustaining and defending the Kingdom and the taking care of the poor and the needy, both temporal concerns. King Benjamin talked about this, too, in **Mosiah 4:26**:

26 And now, for the sake of these things which I have spoken unto you—that is, *for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day*, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants. (Mosiah 4:26)

When King Benjamin taught his people the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he taught them not only how to receive a remission of their sins, but how to *retain* a remission of their sins from day to day – and that is by remembering the poor and the needy. He is distinguishing the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the Law of the Gospel (Alma 4:12-13; 34:28).

The Melchizedek Covenants address spiritual obligations, responsibilities, and commandments. The first one is the Law of Chastity. Elder James Talmage felt this law ought to be called the Law of Virtue. We even talk about it in our Temple recommend interviews when asked if we are honest

in all business relationships with our fellowmen. This law is about being virtuous and chaste *in all of our relationships* and not just our relationship with our spouse.

Also, under the Melchizedek Order is the Law of Consecration. The Law of Sacrifice is a promise to sustain and defend the Kingdom of God while the Law of Consecration is a commitment to use what we have for the building up of the Kingdom and for the Establishment of Zion. Thus, we see that there are two laws and two covenants under each Order of the Priesthood. The Aaronic Order is a temporal Order, and the Melchizedek Order is a spiritual Order.

Notice that they all relate to loving God and loving our fellowman, upon which hang all of the Law and the Prophets. The covenants of the Temple, if lived, can bring us very near to having the character of God.

So when looking at sin and trying to categorize or label it in order of severity, the worst sin is whatever distracts you from loving God and loving your fellowman.

Lehi taught in **2 Ne 2:21**:

21 And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, their state became **a state of probation**, and their time was lengthened, according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. For he gave commandment that all men must repent;

If life is a probationary state as Alma taught, then sin is the misuse of time! The misuse of time is that which distracts you from developing the character that loves God and loves your fellowman. This is why Paul and Moroni talk about having Charity. If we are obedient in everything and have not charity, we are nothing. Paul taught:

**1 Cor 13:1-4, 8, 13**

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and *have not charity*, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and *have not charity*, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and *have not charity*, it profiteth me nothing.

4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Mormon's Letter to Moroni (**Moroni 7:45-48**):

45 And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but

rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

46 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if *ye have not charity, ye are nothing*, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail—

47 But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him.

48 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen.

All Commandments, All Laws, All Prophets and everything they teach is to help us develop charity. If we don't develop it, even though we may be obedient in everything else, we are nothing. The character required to be and dwell in the presence of God is one of Charity, the love of God and our fellow man. The last commandment that Christ issued before His death was to 'love one another, as I have loved you'. Paul explains that without this love we are as 'tinkling symbol and sounding brass', just noise with no end purpose, no reward or glory.